Opinion Trends in World War II: Some Guides to Interpretation

BY HADLEY CANTRIL

FROM SEPTEMBER, 1939, to V-J Day in 1945 the Office of Public Opinion Research maintained a continuous survey of American public opinion regarding major wartime issues. Much of the information obtained in the course of this survey was used in preparing trend charts, presented below, showing the fluctuation of opinions in relation to events during the war.

A number of generalized psychological principles applying to opinions have been formulated, treating opinion as a particular variety of perception.

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OUR UNDERSTANDING of man's social behavior will improve only in so far as we are able to study this behavior concretely and to test principles that may be derived from the experimental laboratory in everyday-life situations. The outbreak of World War II was taken as a significant, if horrible, emergent situation that would present the social scientist with a challenge of his up-to-the-now understanding and enable him to accumulate more data to help him in his self-appointed task of figuring out why men behave as they do. Therefore, at the beginning of this war, the Office of Public Opinion Research undertook to follow some of the reactions of American public opinion to the exciting and tragic events which everyone knew in a vague way were bound to occur in the next few years.[1]

This article has two purposes. The first is to make data embodied in the accompanying trend charts available to persons who may have some interest in or use for the material before time can be found to analyze it in detail along with additional data accumulated during the war years. Much of this material was available only to the White House and

[1] This study was made possible first by a Rockefeller Foundation grant, and later by other private funds.

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to certain government officials at the time it was collected. When the opportunity arises, I hope a much more complete account of the reaction of American opinion during World War II can be prepared. In the meantime, some of the basic trends given here may be of use to those social scientists or other persons who are interested in the study of opinion over a period of time, who are more specifically concerned with World War II, or who would like to have on record the potential use of opinion surveys as guides to or reflections of official policy.[2]

Secondly, anyone studying survey data with the purpose of understanding opinion and its determinants will see in the accompanying trend charts reflections of certain psychological principles that can be derived from experimental data and from controlled studies of everyday life, as well as from results obtained via public opinion polls. Since my own interest in public opinion is chiefly that of a person labeled a "social psychologist," it may be of some help to persons in other fields if a psychologist indicates what seem to him to be some of the psychological principles or useful higher-order abstractions which the combined data of psychology, including these trend charts, allow us to formulate at this stage of the development of our young science.

COLLECTION OF TREND DATA

The material on which the trend charts are based was all obtained through surveys of stratified samples of the adult U.S. population. The great advantages public opinion survey data have over most other kinds of intelligence information used for the interpretation of public opinion are: (1) identical questions are asked (2) of a representative sample of the adult population (3) at approximately the same time.

The data obtained from the outbreak of the war through 1942 were gathered for this Office through the facilities of the American Institute of Public Opinion. The charts also include all points obtained by the

[2] Charts 1 and 2 represent U.S. opinion before Pearl Harbor; Charts 3 and 4 after Pearl Harbor. The first two have previously been published in the author's *Gauging Public Opinion*, Princeton University Press, 1944. The latter two are presented for the first time.

I should once more like to express my indebtedness to George Gallup and the staff of the American Institute of Public Opinion for their cooperation in this study and permission to use their data. I am also most grateful to Gerard B. Lambert for his support of our work during the last three years of the war. Working with Jerry Lambert during some of the war years and later discussing opinion formation with Adelbert Ames, Jr. of the Hanover Institute have been stimulating experiences. I have also profited by discussions of the principles listed with Andie Knutson and Albert Hastorf.

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American Institute where AIPO questions were worded identically to those used by this Office.

In 1943 the Office set up its own nation-wide interviewing facilities to undertake special research tasks. Most of the points on the trend charts obtained subsequent to the end of 1942 are based on data obtained through this organization, known as the Research Council, Inc. To make sure that the sample used in our own surveys was comparable to that of the Institute, a number of questions were deliberately repeated simultaneously via both mechanisms. Entirely comparable results were obtained.[3] The minimum sample used by the Institute during this period was 3000 cases. The minimum sample used by the Research Council was 1200 cases. The Research Council sample was given a test in the election of 1944 where the outcome of the election was predicted with an error of one half of one per cent.[4]

The dates indicated in all the charts are the dates on which ballots were sent out from Princeton. This means that the opinions represented are the opinions of a representative sample of the adult American population during the subsequent week or ten days of the time specifically plotted.

A few events are included at the top of each chart as reference points. Those who want to examine the relation of events to opinion more carefully will necessarily have to compile their own detailed list of events which space makes impossible here. These may be obtained from any newspaper that has complete coverage of domestic and foreign events or more conveniently from some periodical such as *Current History* which contains a monthly index of events.

Although events as such are obviously of the utmost importance as determinants of opinion, just as obviously events are by no means the only determinants of opinion. The context in which events occur must always be borne in mind. No implication is made here that there is any necessary direct causal relationship between events and opinion although such relationships, when the context of opinion is analyzed, are by no means denied.

In the interest of clarity, it has been necessary on all except one

[3] See Cantril, H., "Do Different Polls Get the Same Results?", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 9, No. 1 (1945), 61-69.

[4] See Katz, D., "The Polls and the 1944 Election," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 8, No. 4 (1944), 468-487.

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question (the pre-Pearl Harbor question concerning which side would win the war) to leave out the trend of "no opinion" percentages and, generally, to confine the charts to only one of the alternatives presented. Persons interested in constructing more complete trend charts using all the other alternatives will be able to do so next year when the Office publishes its *Index to Public Opinion*. This volume will contain the complete national figures on all questions asked from 1935 through 1946.

It is impossible to spell out in any brief space the many relationships between opinions and events and between one opinion and another that can be seen by a careful inspection of the accompanying charts. Nevertheless, the material gathered should afford the future historian a great deal more insight on what the war meant to the people back home than historians have had of any previous conflict in world history. Obviously, historical speculation of how people felt during the American, French or Russian Revolutions, during the Civil War, or during any other specified historical period would have been narrowed if it had been possible during those periods to accumulate data which had the reliability of current polling material.

Since funds for this undertaking were necessarily limited and since an investment of around $100 was represented each time a question was asked, the major task was that of selecting questions and timing their use in a way to secure the maximum value over an unpredictable period of time. Obviously, a question that made sense one week might be completely irrelevant or nonsensical the next week. Historians of the future will no doubt wonder why many questions were not posed to the American people during the war. Frequently, hindsight showed that some significant trends had been missed and that it was now too late to begin picking them up. An example of one that was caught in the nick of time is seen in Chart 3 in the dotted line which indicates the per cent of the American people who believed the Allies were winning the war. If that particular question had not been devised until after the North African landing, the erroneous assumption might have been made in the future that American people all along were sure that their present actions were leading to victory.

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QUESTIONS ON WARTIME OPINION

The questions on which the trend charts are based were phrased as follows:

CHART 1.

1. *Which side do you think will win the war—England, or Germany and Italy?*
2. *Do you think the United States will go into the war in Europe sometime before it is over, or do you think we will stay out of the war?*

CHART 2.

1. *Which of these two things do you think is the more important for the United States to try to do—to keep out of war ourselves, or to help England win even at the risk of getting into the war?*
2. *If the question of the United States going to war against Germany and Italy came up for a national vote within the next 2 or 3 weeks, would you vote to go into the war or to stay out of the war?*
3. *Do you think the United States should declare war on Germany and Italy and send our army and navy abroad to fight?*
4. *Do you think it was a mistake for the United States to enter the last World War?*
5. *Do you think the United States should risk war with Japan, if necessary, in order to keep Japan from taking the Dutch East Indies and Singapore?*

CHART 3.

1. *In general, do you approve or disapprove of the way Roosevelt is handling his job as President today?*
2. *In general, do you think the government has gone too far or not far enough in asking people to make sacrifices for the war?*
3. *The way things are going right now, does it seem to you that we are winning the war or losing it?*
4. *If Hitler offered peace now to all countries on the basis of not going further but of leaving matters as they are now, would you favor or oppose such a peace?*
5. *Do you feel that you have a clear idea of what this war is all about—that is, what we are fighting for?*

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6. *If the German army overthrew Hitler and then offered to stop the war and discuss peace terms with the Allies, would you favor or oppose accepting the offer of the German army?*

CHART 4.

1. *Do you think Russia can be trusted to cooperate with us when the war is over?*
2. *Which country is the greatest military threat to the United States—Germany or Japan?*
3. *Which of these two things do you think the U.S. should try to do when the war is over: Stay out of world affairs as much as we can, or take an active part in world affairs?*
4. *If Germany is defeated do you think a peace that will last for at least 50 years* can *be worked out?*
5. *How much longer do you think the war with Germany will last?*
6. *How much longer do you think the war with Japan will last?*

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF OPINIONS

When we analyze opinions relating to wartime phenomena, as well as others, we find that an opinion, like an attitude, can best be understood if it is regarded as a particular variety of perception. The basic principles concerning the nature of perception also hold for the nature of opinion. By an "opinion" we generally refer to an attitude which has been or often is expressed by an individual. The psychology of "opinion" is therefore the same as the psychology of "attitudes." Both are rooted in the psychology of perception.

The principles worked out here may seem to be quite self-evident. Some of them are expressed in the second person. For experience is yours alone and the validity of any psychological formulation must be tested finally in your own experience. A few concrete applications of the principles are indicated.[5]

1. An opinion is formed when, and only when, you face a frustrating situation where a judgment is required on which you must base action that will help you carry out a purpose.

[5] In 1944 when analyzing Charts 1 and 2, I made note of "Some Laws of Public Opinion" in *Gauging Public Opinion*, Princeton University Press, 1944, ch. 16. The present principles are not supplements or additions to the seventeen "laws" previously indicated, but may be regarded as higher-order generalizations which include the laws previously indicated.

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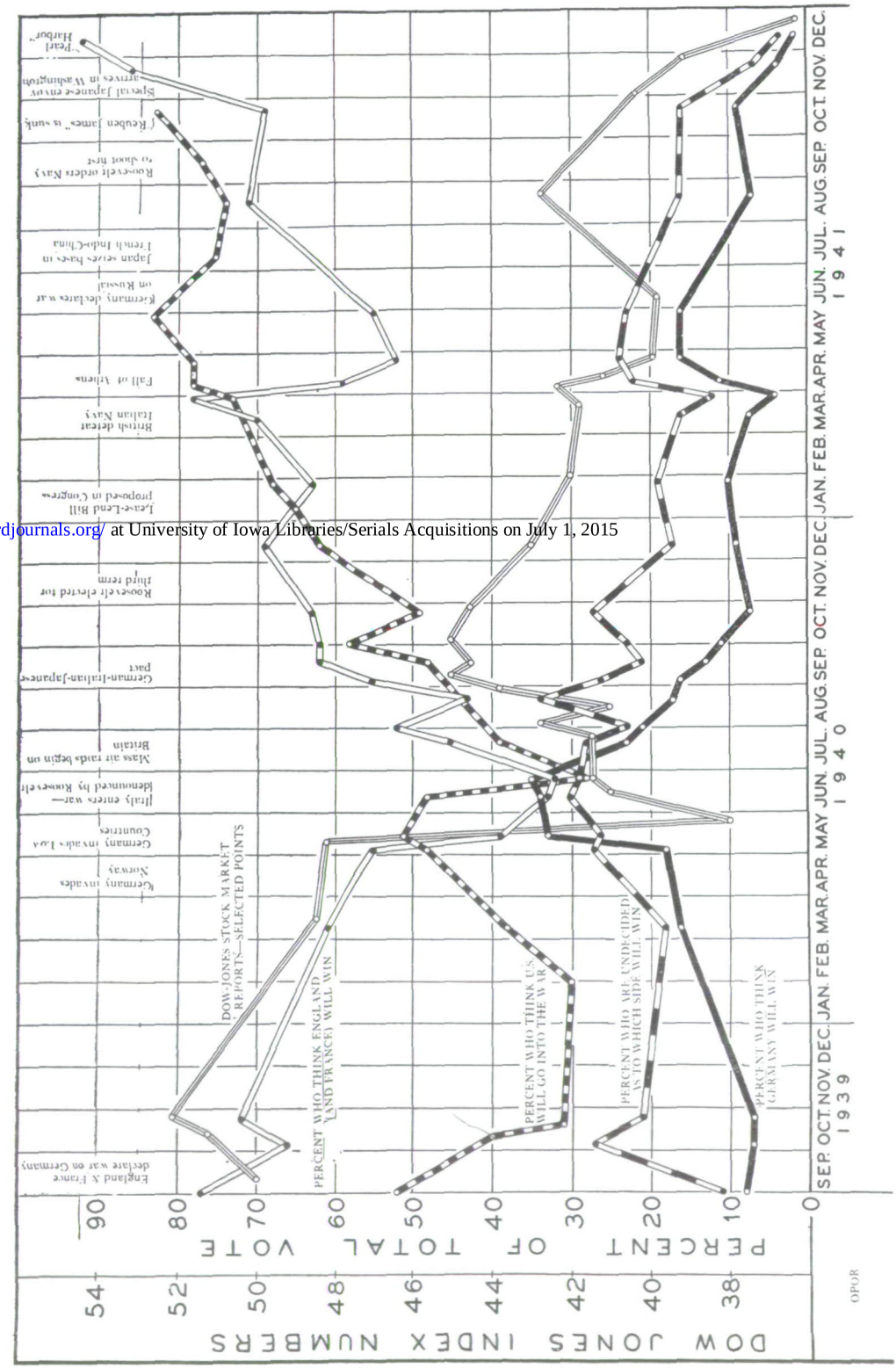

CHART 1

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PERCENT OF TOTAL VOTE
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
England & France declare war on Germany
Germany invades Norway
Germany invades Low Countries
Italy enters war— denounced by Roosevelt
Mass air raids begin on Britain
German-Italian-Japanese pact
Roosevelt elected for third term
Lend-Lease Bill proposed in Congress
British defeat Italian Navy
Fall of Athens
Germany declares war on Russia
Japan seizes bases in French Indo-China
"Reuben James" is sunk
Special Japanese envoy arrives in Washington
"Pearl Harbor"
PERCENT WHO THINK IT WAS A MISTAKE TO ENTER THE LAST WAR
PERCENT WHO THINK IT IS MORE IMPORTANT TO HELP ENGLAND THAN TO KEEP OUT OF WAR
PERCENT WILLING TO RISK WAR WITH JAPAN RATHER THAN LET JAPAN CONTINUE HER AGGRESSIONS
PERCENT WHO WOULD VOTE TO GO TO WAR AGAINST GERMANY IF A NATIONAL VOTE WERE TAKEN
PERCENT WHO THINK U.S. SHOULD ENTER THE WAR
PERCENT WHO THINK U.S. SHOULD DECLARE WAR ON GERMANY
SEP. OCT. NOV. DEC. JAN. FEB. MAR. APR. MAY JUN. JUL. AUG. SEP. OCT. NOV. DEC. JAN. FEB. MAR. APR. MAY JUN. JUL. AUG. SEP. OCT. NOV. DEC.
1939
1940
1941
OPOR

CHART 2

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CHART 3

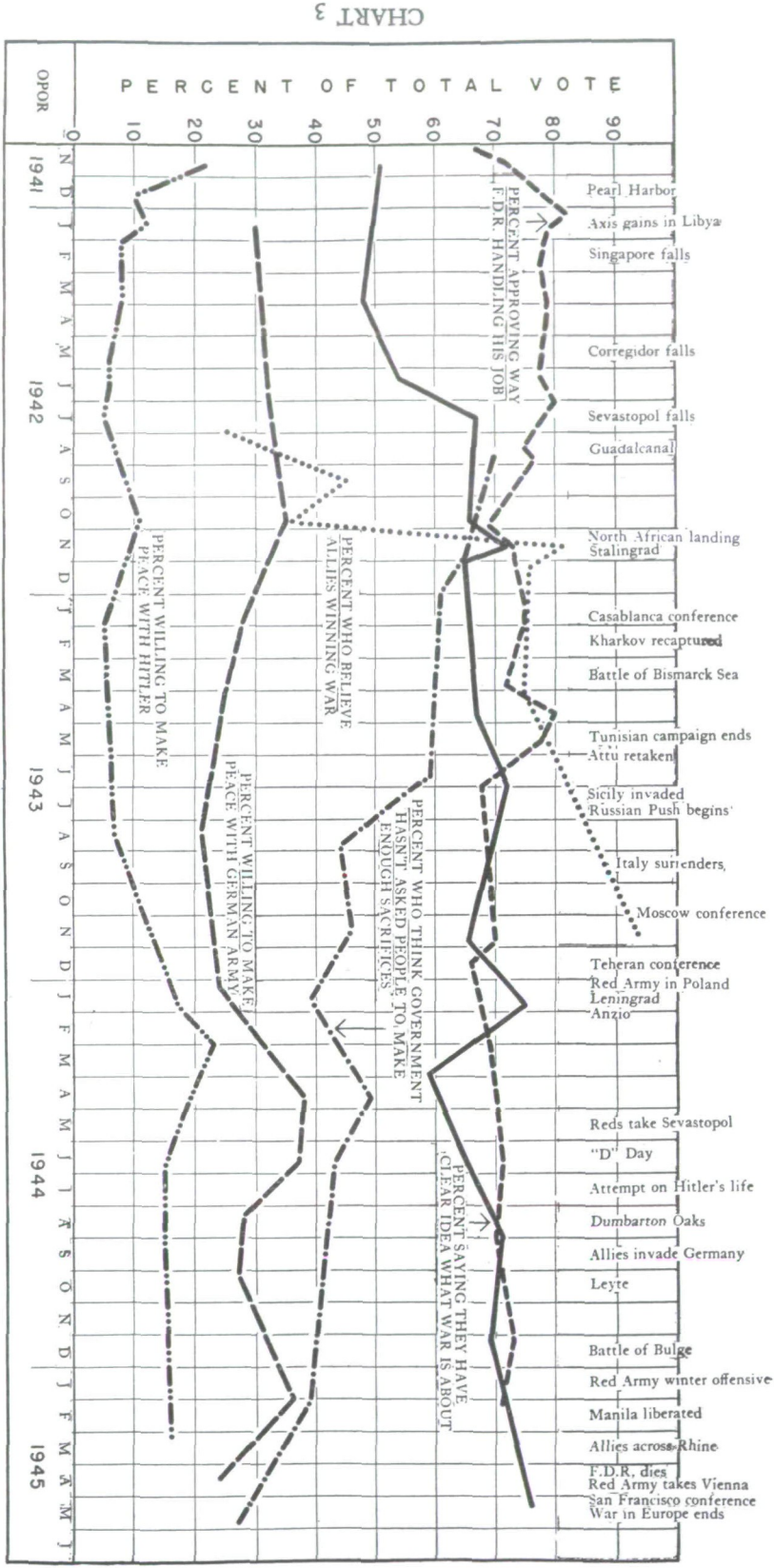

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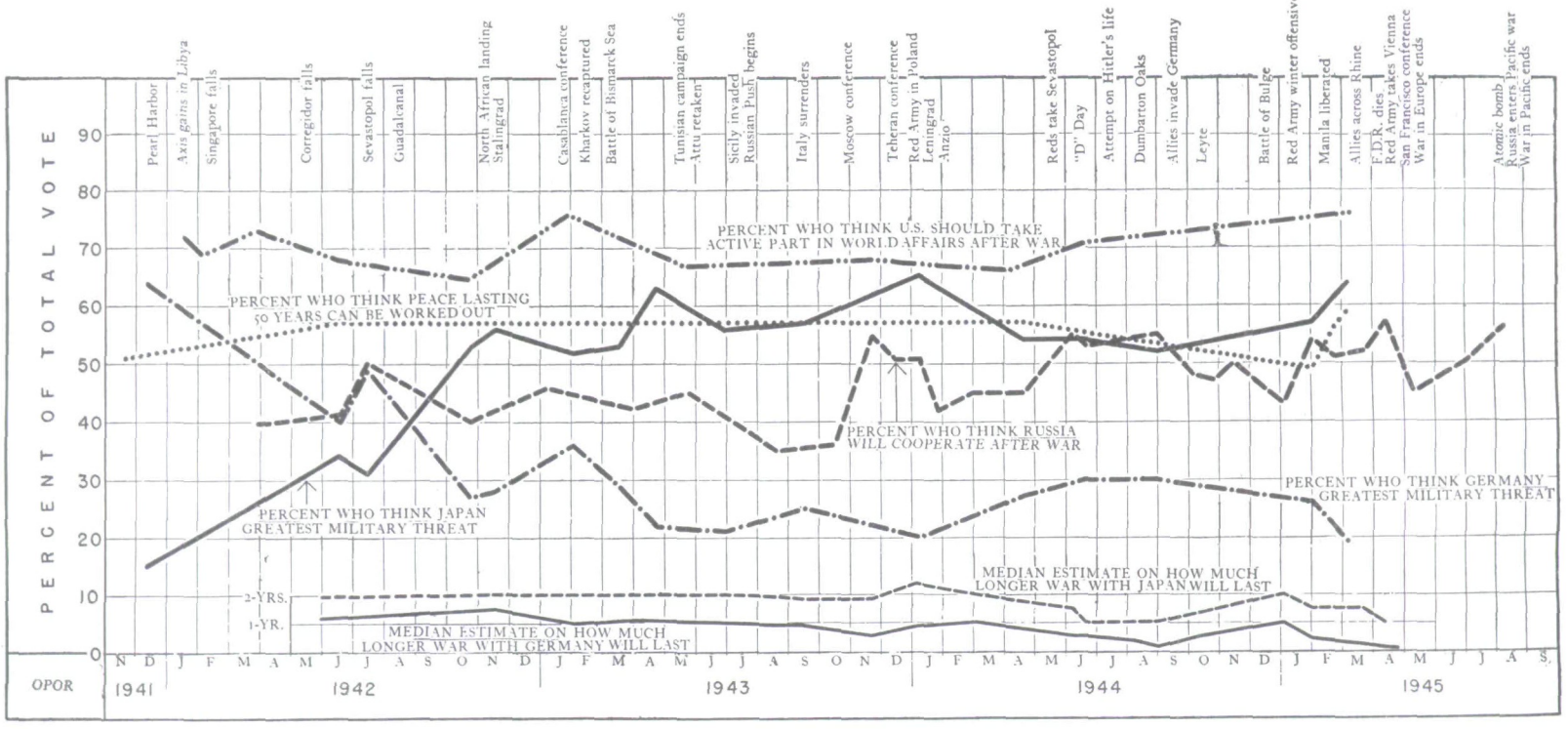
CHART 4



It is therefore unreasonable to expect that all people will have opinions on the same problems. Since the specific purposes that affect social behavior are largely determined by the membership and reference group identifications acquired, questions used on surveys and data obtained from representative samples of the total adult population must be studied with this fact always clearly in mind.

2. *An opinion is built up from past experience as a guide to purposive action.*

The *raison d'être* of any opinion can only be understood when we learn what the past experiences of an individual are and how these are tied to his purposes. Since it is impossible at best to acquire a complete developmental history of any individual and since the polling mechanism must usually and deliberately rule out the possibility of elaborate depth interviewing as impracticable, questionnaires must be designed and analyzed in terms of the best probable hunches that may get at indicators of experiences (i.e. occupation, education, church attendance) which may at least give some insights into the nature of past experience and its functional significance to the respondent.

3. *An opinion is based chiefly on unconscious cues which are mustered together and integrated when their relevance in forming a value-judgment for purposive action is aroused by some situation.*

Since the basic purposes behind our behavior are apt to be so poorly understood by us, and since our value-judgments are generally made so swiftly and unconsciously, the "reasons" people give for their expressed opinions can at best be regarded as only partial.

4. *Knowledge and rational thought serve the function of bringing into the process of value-judgment (opinion formation) more cues to be weighed.*

5. *Knowledge must not be confused with understanding. Understanding, as distinguished from knowledge, means that knowledge has been put to some concrete test in purposive action.*

It cannot therefore be expected that "information" or "knowledge" as such will have any consistent or uniform effect on opinion. "Knowledge" is useful only in so far as it is functionally related to purpose. Public opinion studies must therefore aim at understanding when and why knowledge becomes functional. Mere cataloguings of relationships between "information" and opinion are apt to be misleading.

6. *Opinion is not changed or modified unless or until (1) your pur-*

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poses change, or (2) your actions have demonstrated to you that your previous opinions are poor guides to effective action in achieving some purpose.

An understanding of shifts of opinions with events or situations can therefore be obtained only in so far as the significance of the event or situation to purposive activity is understood.

7. Whether or not an opinion will actually help you carry out a purpose can only be tested by action in concrete situations. If you, yourself, are not the direct participant in the action, you may still, if less reliably, test your opinions by observing the effectiveness of the actions of others whose purposes you believe you share and understand.

8. Opinions, upon which concrete judgment and actions are based, often appear to go counter to opinions abstractly held since the latter are purely intellectual data that either call for no concrete action or offer no possibility of concrete action.

Even though opinion may be fairly uniform concerning a given topic, such as the role the United States should play in international affairs, the public may often be properly described as "apathetic" to the problem, since people see few if any ways in which they can act concretely to implement purpose as reflected by opinion. The functional role played by institutions such as local governments, the church, or the United Nations in the lives of individuals can only be concretely understood when the possibilities they provide for specific action on the part of the individual are known.

9. Opinions which have not been tested by action are apt to be meaningless in concreteness, poor guides to future actions, and unreliable as the basis of predicting behavior.

You may "believe in" abstractions such as "democracy," "freedom," or "Christianity" but nevertheless frequently act in undemocratic, repressive or unchristian ways in concrete situations where your hunch is that your own purposes will be thwarted by the behavior of others.

10. When the reliability of an opinion as a guide for purposive action is confirmed by concrete action, you experience a sense of surety as a psychological co-product. On the other hand, a feeling of insecurity accompanies a prognosis for action which is not confirmed by concrete action.

11. Surety also results when cues built up from past experience supplement each other; lack of surety results when cues conflict with each

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other. When an individual has conflicting specific purposes, he inevitably acquires conflicting opinions which are subjectively accompanied by a feeling of lack of surety, of frustration.

12. At critical times, opinions may be described as relatively "unstructured" and people are found to be relatively "suggestible" because former standards and cues are unable to provide reliable guides for purposive action in new and emergent situations.

It is during such periods as these that the ability of older leaders is tested and, if it proves inadequate as it often does, that new leaders are likely to emerge. Perhaps the most important role of any leader is to provide the value-judgments necessary to interpret new and emergent situations in such a way that this new perception will appear to people as plausible and as having a high chance of serving as a guide to effective action, thus resolving frustrations created by the inadequacy of previous understandings. The confidence in any leader depends upon his ability to demonstrate his capacity to make effective value-judgments. The popularity of a leader is likely to be particularly high when he has taken some action which resolves frustration by giving the impression that the action will help achieve the desired goals.

13. Opinions occur within a context of expectancy. If you are a human being, plugged in to concrete social life with its constant flux and change, the opinions you have now serve to connect the past with the future in terms of concrete action.

14. Expectancies must not be confused with predictions. Predictions are more in the nature of abstract intellectual judgments not necessarily taken into account in determining your present action. Predictions become expectancies when you adjust your present behavior in terms of what you think will be the effect of such adjustment on the carrying out of your purposes.

"Predictions" will be most meaningful, then, in areas of "expectancy"—that is, when a person has related the possibility of a future occurrence to his own situation. Public opinion questions which ask people to predict the outcome of elections, the probability of a depression, etc. should therefore first determine whether or not a future occurrence is regarded as an "expectancy," that is, as a probable future occurrence that is being taken into account in an individual's *present* adjustments.

15. Opinion is affected by events only when those events are per-

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ceived as having some personal significance in terms of aiding or hindering the carrying out of your purposes.

Events which may be of great "historical" importance or which may be reported in banner headlines are by no means always those that affect opinion except as they may help to build up a context for interpretation and for the plausibility of future judgments.

16. The intensity with which an opinion is held is dependent upon the importance of the purpose the opinion serves. You are by no means always conscious of the purposes to which your opinions are causally related. In fact, you are by no means always conscious of your purposes.

Studies of the intensity of opinion will have more than descriptive value only in so far as poll administrators can obtain some information of the particular hierarchy of purposes held by particular respondents.

17. Most opinions, as compared with non-social perceptions, are felt with relatively high intensity since opinions, unlike some other perceptions, usually involve the purposes of other people and the relationship of their purposes to yours.

Since the purposes of other people may be seen as potential threats or aids to the carrying out of your own purposes, when we are studying intensities of opinion it is essential to determine group identifications and gather all information possible concerning group loyalties and what individuals regard as the major threats to the achievement of their purposes.

18. Your opinions are "accurate" or "right" in proportion as they take into account all factors relevant to the successful carrying out of purposes.

In so far as your opinions do not include the purposes of all other human beings who might be affected by your actions, these opinions will in the long run prove "inaccurate" or "wrong." It seems not unlikely that it is for this reason that nearly every great religious prophet used as a cornerstone for his teaching a precept almost identical to the Golden Rule of Christianity.

19. Over any long historical period, opinions may be expected to become more "accurate" as men learn through frustration and experience to include in their perceptions the purposes of others.

In this connection, technological developments such as methods of communication, production, or warfare that increase the interdependence of human beings will eventually build up in men perceptions (opin-

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ions) adequate to accommodate the uses of technology to serve their own purposes. Increasing interdependence due to technological advances will force the inclusion of the purposes of more and more people into our perception. This also means that over the long haul, abstractions such as "race," "class," "nationality," "capital vs. labor," etc. are bound to break down since the perception of men as members of an abstract grouping goes counter to the perception of other human beings *qua* human beings.

20. *Opinion cannot be explained or fully understood in terms of correlation relationships only. Higher-order abstractions are necessary. Especially necessary for the understanding of opinions is an understanding of the purposes of human beings and their capacities for making value-judgments.*

This is one of the most compelling reasons to supplement survey data with more complete case studies, and insights thus gained should wherever possible be subjected to laboratory tests as checks of any higher-order abstractions used as "explanations."[6]

CONCLUSION

Historians and other social scientists may find in the data provided by public opinion studies a new and useful body of information to aid them in interpretation. The social psychologist, on the other hand, is likely to be working in a vacuum if he does not actively seek the aid of the historian, the economist, the ethnologist, or the sociologist in his own search for the determinants of opinion.

And it is, of course, the special responsibility of the psychologist to seek out by a variety of methods those relationships that are causal and to try to point out to his colleagues in other areas the interplay of the psychological processes characteristic of man *irrespective of* the time or place in which a man lives. Otherwise, the psychologist has only himself to blame if oversimplified abstractions (such as lists of instincts or needs, typologies of one sort or another, or certain Freudian concepts) are appealed to by those who depend on the psychologist for their assumptions concerning human nature.

[6] For a more inclusive formulation of the principles indicated here, see Cantril, H., *Understanding Man's Social Behavior: Preliminary Notes*, Office of Public Opinion Research, Princeton, N.J., 1947.

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